DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 398 PS 023 654

TITLE	Minnesota's Child Support System Fails To Meet Children's Needs.
INSTITUTION	Kids Count Minnesota, Minneapolis.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Greenwich, CT.
PUB DATE	93
NOTE	9p.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Statistical Data (110)
JOURNAL CIT	Minnesota Kids Count; Spr 1993
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Support; Child Welfare; County Programs; *Family Financial Resources; Financial Needs; Legal Responsibility; *One Parent Family; Program Effectiveness; *Program Improvement; State Aid; Unwed Mothers
IDENTIFIERS	*Child Support Enforcement Services; *Minnesota

ABSTRACT

This newsletter issue provides an evaluation of child support systems and services of the 87 counties in Minnesota. No county in the state collects enough to support children, child support is often late or not paid in full, children whose parents never married are especially dependent on the child support systems, and child support services vary according to each county. In reality, costs of raising a child far exceed the collected amount of support. Given these circumstances, getting adequate support involves five critical steps: (1) locating the absent parent; (2) establishing paternity; (3) establishing an adequate amount of child support; (4) enforcing the child support order; and (5) reviewing and modifying outdated orders. The newsletter presents six suggestions for improving the child support system, including centralizing functions and simplifying guidelines. Five measures of child support enforcement for evaluating the effectiveness of county enforcement are provided: support ordered, monthly amount ordered, monthly amount collected, timely payments, and unmarried fathers determined. A table of child support in September 1992, by county, lists each county's cases and rank by the five measures, and includes related information. (AP)

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kids count minnesota

Spring 1993

Minnesota's child support system fails to meet children's needs

Each year in Minnesota about 7,500 families with children under age 18 are torn apart by divorce. Another 17,000 children are born to unmarried parents. Unless child support is paid regularly and on time, these children are left with only one parent to try to meet their economic needs.

Counties are responsible for establishing and collecting child support for the 185,000 children, 1 in 6 of all Minnesota children, now in our state's child support system. Demands for child support services are overwhelming and point to the need for a closer look at the system.

This report looks at how children fare in the 87 different county child support systems.

Top Ten Counties

1. Waseca	6. Stevens
2. Goodhue	7. Houston
3. Olmsted	8. Nicollet
4. Lake	9. McLeod
5. Brown	10. Carver

These ten counties had the best scores in Minnesota when calculated by summing their rank on each of the five measures of child support enforcement (see page 4).

Unless otherwise noted, all data in the report refer to children and cases in the Minnesota child support system in September 1992, as reported by counties to the Minnesota Dept of Human Services.

KIDS COUNT finds:

• No county collects enough to support children. The average child in Minnesota's child support system gets $77 per month, barely enough to buy a week's child care. Lake County's high of $130 per month is about enough to pay only for clothing and transportation for a child under age nine. Collections in some counties are abysmal. In Mahnomen County, the lowest, each child gets $19 per month, not enough to buy clothing except for an infant.

• Child support is often late or not paid in full. In over half (53%) of all cases, children are owed more than $1,000. Late payment rates (arreas) vary widely — from Stevens County, where in one-third of all cases children are owed more than $1,000, to Ramsey County, where in two-thirds of all cases children are owed more than $1,000.

• Children whose parents never married are especially dependent on the child support system, but help for them varies. While 22% of all Minnesota children are born to unmarried parents each year, 41% of children in the child support system have parents who never married. Counties vary in their rate of determining paternity. St. Louis County has a higher than average rate of paternities determined (80%) even though their rate of births to unmarried parents (26%) is significantly higher than the state average. Polk County has a much lower rate of births to unmarried parents (12%) yet paternity is determined in less than half of the cases (47%).

• Children living in poor counties are likely to get less child support. In Cass, Clearwater, Mahnomen, and Wadena, 4 of Minnesota's 5 poorest counties, children get very little child support. Though children tend to get more support in counties with lower poverty rates, counties with the lowest poverty do not have the highest collections. Anoka County, with a poverty rate of only 5%, half the state average, ranks 26th in collecting child support. Poverty ranges from 8% to 12% in Lake, Goodhue, Waseca, and Rock counties where children get the most support.

• Some counties clearly do better than others at collecting child support. Despite having the sixth worst rate of poverty in the state, Stevens County collects $95 per month per child, well above the state average. Wright County, which has a low poverty rate and a relatively low number of children born to unmarried parents, collects only $67 per month per child, 13% below the state average.

Look inside for:

- Comparison of county orders and collections to the needs of children
- County-by-county data on five basic measures of child support
- Recommendations for change

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Children's expenses far exceed support

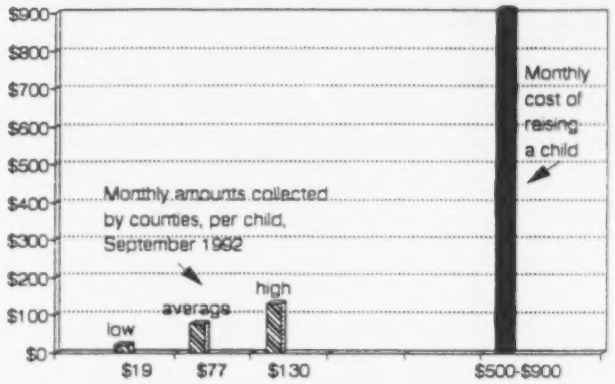
According to data from the United States Department of Agriculture, as adjusted by the Children's Defense Fund, depending on how old a child is and where the family lives, it costs $500 to $900 per month to raise a child in Minnesota. The highest average county child support collection, $130 per month, is little more than one-fourth of the minimum amount needed. This leaves the custodial parent struggling to pay the rest of the child's housing, food, transportation, clothing, health care, and education or child care costs.

Almost one-third of children in Minnesota's child support system (about 52,000) do not even have an order for support. They are waiting for the county to locate their absent parent, establish paternity, collect information needed to set support, or get into court.

When support is ordered, the amount depends on the income of the noncustodial parent, not on the needs of the child. When noncustodial parents are poor themselves, child support orders are low. The average child support order is $116 per month which is less than one-quarter of the minimum costs of raising a child in Minnesota.

Unfortunately, thousands of noncustodial parents don't pay the full amount of court ordered support and many pay nothing. The result is that, in over half of all cases with orders, children do not get a substantial amount of the support due to them.

Support Collected
compared to costs of raising a child



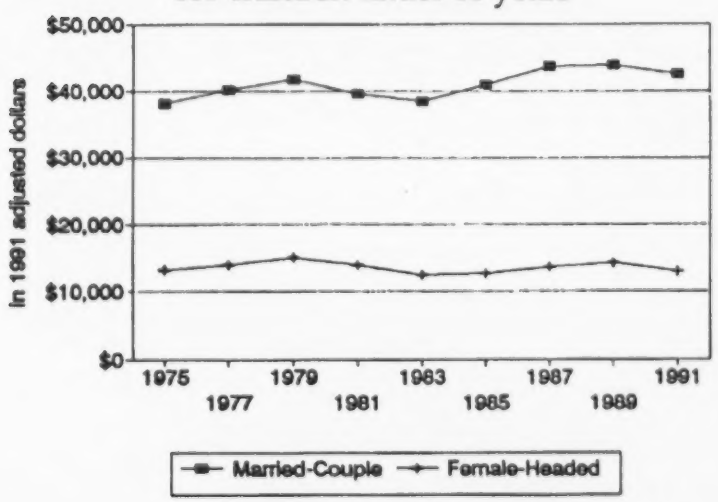
The average amount of child support actually paid in Minnesota is $77 per month per child, only two-thirds of the amount ordered. In Rock County, the county with the highest average order, children who should receive $182 a month get only two-thirds of that amount, $119 a month.

Most children living with only one parent live with their mothers. Children in families headed by women are four times as likely to be poor as children living in other Minnesota families. In families with children headed by women, two in five are poor.

Nationally, the median income of single mother families is less than one-third the income of married-couple families; while the real incomes of married-couple families have grown 12% since 1975, those of single mother families have declined.

Children in single parent families are better off when child support is paid. However, when orders are low and payments even lower, children's most basic needs are not met. Children can't live on unpaid child support.

U.S. median family income
for children under 18 years



Getting adequate support involves five critical steps

Establishing and collecting child support is complicated and time-consuming, involving not only the mother and father, but also attorneys, judges, and child support workers. It includes several critical steps and may be marked by an endless variety of detours, any one of which may keep a child waiting for months or years with no financial support. The steps, and some difficulties that may present themselves along the way, include:

1. Locating the absent parent. If the parent has left the state, does not visit the child, or cannot be located through the employment system, finding the absent parent may take many months. Nationally, about 30% of all children needing support are not living in the same state as their absent parent.

2. Establishing paternity. Most counties will not order child support for children of unmarried parents without first having a court order for paternity, yet only 54% of the 75,694 children in the system born to unmarried parents have paternity determined. Delays in the legal system are common, and fathers get harder to find as time elapses. In counties where a large number of children are born to unmarried parents, establishing paternity consumes tremendous financial resources.

3. Establishing an adequate child support order. According to Professor Kathryn Rettig's study, "The Economic Consequences of Divorce in Minnesota," 48% of Minnesota's child support orders are lower than guidelines set by the legislature. Even when courts follow guidelines, determining income is difficult when parents do not cooperate.

4. Enforcing the child support order. Even though support can be withheld from a noncustodial parent's income, this simple procedure is still being phased in and doesn't work when parents are self-employed, work for cash, or change jobs frequently. Tax refund intercepts, property liens, revocation of licenses, and contempt are used. Unfortunately they take a lot of time and money in a system financed largely by local property taxes, which are regressive and politically sensitive.

5. Reviewing and modifying outdated orders. Increasing an old order is particularly important for children whose support was set when their parents were young and not yet established in the work place. Unfortunately, orders are seldom brought up to date because counties give a lower priority to updating than to establishing new orders or finding delinquent parents.

Suggestions for improving the child support system

Every child in need of child support deserves to have a court order which meets state guidelines and to receive prompt payment of the full amount ordered each month. The following steps should be considered to make this happen more quickly and efficiently for children:

- **Centralize more child support functions.** Because not all counties can afford sophisticated systems to locate absent parents, for example, this should be done at the state level. The state should also develop a more efficient way to find parents who move to new jobs and create a central depository for child support payments. A central depository would be more efficient for employers who withhold support and now must forward the money to several separate counties.

- **Increase and simplify child support guidelines** so children get more support, parents know what to expect, and attorneys have fewer issues to argue. Minnesota should consider using an approach to child support that focuses on children's needs and allocates support between the parents.

- **Provide a state-wide, state-managed administrative process for setting, enforcing and modifying support.** Families without attorneys should have access to the process. Forms should be standardized and simplified.

- **Learn what successful counties are doing right and replicate their methods throughout the system.** For example, seven counties have court orders for 90% or more of their cases while ten have orders for only 70% of cases. What can be learned from these counties?

- **Concentrate staff resources on difficult cases.** If more cases can be standardized and sent more quickly though the system, staff can focus on the cases that need more attention (for example, those with an absent parent who is out of state or one who is self-employed.)

- **Explore the idea of automating child support so it works like income tax.** A parent paying support could report income and calculate changes in support based on a sliding scale. This simple procedure would avoid the costly court procedures now needed to update orders.

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Child Support by

County	Support Ordered		Monthly Amount Ordered		Monthly Amount Collected	
	Cases	Rank	Per Child	Rank	Per Child	Rank
Aitkin	82%	46	$105	53	$65	61
Anoka	77%	66	$134	16	$88	26
Becker	80%	57	$96	62	$66	60
Beltrami	68%	77	$74	78	$46	77
Benton	77%	65	$116	38	$80	39
Big Stone	80%	54	$102	56	$70	56
Blue Earth	86%	25	$112	44	$79	42
Brown	86%	29	$136	12	$106	7
Carlton	85%	35	$128	20	$90	22
Carver	87%	23	$149	8	$106	6
Cass	66%	80	$68	82	$39	82
Chippewa	86%	26	$123	27	$86	28
Chisago	79%	59	$122	30	$75	49
Clay	85%	36	$139	9	$92	19
Clearwater	87%	16	$64	83	$31	83
Cook	88%	10	$103	55	$70	55
Cottonwood	69%	75	$81	76	$44	79
Crow Wing	73%	72	$95	64	$58	70
Dakota	83%	45	$139	10	$97	14
Dodge	76%	67	$117	36	$82	33
Douglas	81%	53	$120	32	$87	27
Faribault, Martin	86%	24	$107	51	$77	47
Fillmore	92%	3	$114	42	$81	38
Freeborn	85%	38	$133	18	$93	17
Goodhue	89%	8	$173	2	$129	2
Grant	87%	18	$89	70	$67	58
Hennepin	62%	82	$125	26	$84	30
Houston	91%	4	$136	15	$92	18
Hubbard	77%	64	$105	54	$61	65
Isanti	79%	61	$115	40	$70	57
Itasca	85%	37	$91	69	$64	62
Jackson	87%	19	$117	37	$81	37
Kanabec	79%	60	$98	60	$60	67
Kandiyohi	78%	62	$82	74	$50	75
Kittson	93%	1	$110	48	$79	43
Koochiching	76%	68	$111	46	$78	45
Lac Qui Parle	87%	21	$127	22	$98	13
Lake	90%	7	$166	3	$130	1
Lake of the Woods	87%	20	$92	67	$44	80
Le Sueur	88%	11	$96	63	$63	64
Lincoln, Lyon, Murray	74%	70	$88	72	$58	69
McLeod	87%	17	$133	17	$100	12
Mahnomen	54%	84	$38	84	$19	84
Marshall	86%	28	$116	39	$80	41
Meeker	68%	76	$89	71	$53	72
Mille Lacs	82%	49	$93	66	$60	66
Morrison	90%	6	$119	33	$90	23
Mower	86%	30	$123	29	$88	25
Nicollet	91%	5	$164	4	$106	8
Nobles	74%	71	$100	59	$72	53

County: September 1992

Timely Payments		Unmarried Fathers Determined		Related Information		
Score	Rank	Children	Rank	County Poverty Rate	Children in System	Nonmarital Rate
45%	70	69%	37	19%	736	33%
43%	74	70%	33	5%	11,489	36%
58%	14	77%	11	18%	1,902	42%
44%	73	43%	79	24%	2,148	46%
50%	50	54%	67	10%	1,331	33%
51%	41	74%	19	15%	206	34%
46%	67	73%	23	19%	1,786	32%
61%	8	77%	13	8%	724	27%
47%	65	69%	39	12%	1,406	34%
54%	28	73%	24	5%	1,104	33%
39%	82	50%	73	22%	1,162	56%
53%	31	64%	49	13%	458	25%
47%	66	64%	48	8%	1,456	31%
40%	80	69%	35	16%	1,827	35%
45%	69	86%	1	23%	466	45%
38%	83	83%	3	11%	82	38%
52%	38	41%	81	14%	458	32%
42%	76	63%	52	15%	2,075	37%
51%	43	57%	61	4%	8,045	36%
47%	62	61%	57	8%	514	33%
51%	42	69%	38	13%	1,009	28%
52%	39	67%	41	12%	1,438	23%
53%	32	73%	21	15%	554	25%
49%	52	63%	54	10%	1,209	32%
56%	18	74%	18	8%	1,450	25%
53%	34	84%	2	15%	149	18%
47%	63	46%	77	9%	48,199	48%
60%	10	72%	26	9%	474	20%
40%	81	64%	50	17%	634	25%
43%	75	55%	64	9%	1,130	26%
55%	21	73%	25	16%	2,238	28%
50%	49	67%	40	12%	322	22%
46%	68	63%	53	15%	710	30%
40%	79	63%	51	14%	1,688	37%
51%	44	82%	6	12%	101	41%
57%	16	76%	14	13%	724	30%
61%	5	71%	30	13%	173	22%
60%	11	64%	47	10%	375	25%
41%	77	77%	10	11%	136	23%
48%	57	74%	20	9%	937	23%
54%	25	42%	80	14%	1,447	29%
61%	7	71%	28	8%	1,048	32%
52%	37	55%	65	26%	279	64%
51%	47	77%	12	14%	240	31%
52%	40	40%	83	11%	754	29%
41%	78	59%	58	14%	994	30%
54%	30	83%	4	16%	1,123	33%
53%	33	75%	16	10%	1,673	34%
49%	55	81%	7	9%	844	32%
49%	54	40%	82	12%	588	38%

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Child Support by

County	Support Ordered		Monthly Amount Ordered		Monthly Amount Collected	
	Cases	Rank	Per Child	Rank	Per Child	Rank
Norman	83%	44	$105	52	$83	31
Olmsted	88%	13	$138	11	$101	11
Otter Tail	80%	56	$95	65	$63	63
Pennington	78%	63	$80	77	$52	74
Pine	87%	15	$121	31	$78	44
Pipestone	85%	34	$125	25	$82	34
Polk	67%	78	$71	81	$46	78
Pope	72%	74	$84	73	$59	68
Ramsey	60%	83	$91	68	$48	76
Red Lake	88%	12	$123	28	$84	29
Redwood	86%	27	$128	21	$92	20
Renville	85%	32	$107	50	$78	46
Rice	81%	51	$127	23	$90	21
Rock	89%	9	$182	1	$119	4
Roseau	85%	33	$109	49	$74	51
St. Louis	81%	50	$118	35	$82	35
Scott	86%	31	$164	5	$112	5
Sherburne	81%	52	$133	19	$95	16
Sibley	82%	47	$102	57	$73	52
Stearns	75%	69	$114	41	$80	40
Steele	84%	40	$136	14	$101	10
Stevens	88%	14	$136	13	$95	15
Swift	84%	41	$101	58	$71	54
Todd	85%	39	$81	75	$53	73
Traverse	66%	79	$73	80	$53	71
Wabasha	87%	22	$118	34	$82	32
Wadena	80%	55	$74	79	$44	81
Waseca	92%	2	$161	6	$127	3
Washington	79%	58	$152	7	$105	9
Watonwan	82%	48	$111	45	$75	50
Wilkin	72%	73	$110	47	$76	48
Winona	83%	43	$126	24	$82	36
Wright	64%	81	$96	61	$67	59
Yellow Medicine	83%	42	$113	43	$88	24
State Average	72%		$116		$77	

Support Ordered is the percentage of all cases in each county's system which have court orders.

Monthly Amount Ordered is the amount due each child, as determined by dividing the sum of current monthly obligations by the number of children with and without orders.

Monthly Amount Collected is the amount collected for each child as determined by dividing the sum of current monthly collections by the number of children with and without orders.

County: September 1992

Timely Payments		Unmarried Fathers Determined		Related Information		
Score	Rank	Children	Rank	County Poverty Rate	Children in System	Nonmarital Rate
58%	13	75%	15	15%	194	29%
55%	23	83%	5	7%	3,139	29%
48%	59	53%	69	14%	1,699	23%
51%	48	47%	76	16%	695	37%
45%	71	71%	29	15%	1,197	33%
51%	45	54%	66	15%	262	30%
47%	61	50%	74	14%	1,858	35%
56%	19	47%	75	14%	336	26%
33%	84	45%	78	11%	28,665	59%
57%	15	73%	22	15%	109	21%
55%	20	75%	17	13%	331	26%
61%	6	65%	46	13%	380	27%
54%	29	53%	68	9%	1,930	36%
48%	56	63%	55	12%	174	24%
54%	24	61%	56	11%	494	22%
53%	35	80%	9	14%	10,037	33%
52%	36	69%	36	4%	1,689	32%
49%	51	66%	42	8%	1,464	27%
64%	2	52%	72	10%	399	32%
49%	53	53%	70	12%	3,395	33%
57%	17	66%	44	7%	1,041	27%
66%	1	72%	27	21%	191	29%
59%	12	70%	32	14%	333	26%
61%	9	57%	60	19%	1,079	29%
55%	22	35%	84	15%	189	48%
47%	60	66%	45	8%	622	26%
48%	58	56%	63	22%	781	30%
62%	3	80%	8	9%	685	27%
54%	26	59%	59	4%	3,528	36%
51%	46	69%	34	12%	375	33%
62%	4	57%	62	11%	282	37%
44%	72	66%	43	13%	1,600	39%
47%	64	52%	71	7%	3,490	30%
54%	27	70%	31	15%	330	23%
47%		54%		10%	184,988	41%

Timely Payment Score is the percentage of cases with orders which have no arrears or arrears less than $1000.

Unmarried Fathers Determined is the percentage of children in the system who were born to unmarried parents and for whom a declaration of parentage was filed or a court order adjudicating paternity exists. The mothers are legally identified with birth.

Nonmarital Rate is the percentage of children in the system who were not born in a marriage.

Information sources: U.S. Census 1990; Department of Human Services forms PWEF 5015, 5016, 5018, and 5811 – all information from September 1992.

Five measures of child support enforcement

These factors were considered in ranking the effectiveness of county child support enforcement.

Support Ordered shows the percentage of all cases in the child support system of each county which have court orders. Until there is a court order, a child has no legal right to child support.

Monthly Amount Ordered shows the average amount due each child in the county system. It is determined by dividing the sum of current monthly obligations by the total number of children with and without orders. The monthly amount ordered is the amount of support legally due to each child.

Monthly Amount Collected shows the average amount collected for each child in the county system. It is determined by dividing the sum of monthly obligations (arrears are not included) collected by the total number of children with and without orders. The monthly amount collected is the money actually available to support the child.

Timely Payments shows the percent of cases in which children receive most of their support on time, defined as those which have either no arrears or arrears less than $1000. As the amount of unpaid child support grows, children face deeper financial distress.

Unmarried Fathers Determined shows the percent of children in the system whose fathers have been determined even though they were not married to their mothers. It is derived by dividing the number of children with completed declarations of parentage or court orders of paternity by the total number of children in the system who were born to unmarried parents. This is the first step in establishing support for children of unmarried parents.

Minnesota KIDS COUNT, a joint project of the Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota and Congregations Concerned for Children, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, provides county-by-county assessment on the condition of Minnesota's children. Minnesota KIDS COUNT releases annual reports to provide a comprehensive statistical profile of Minnesota's children and a blueprint for action on their behalf.

What you can do

- **Pay your child support.** If you are a person who should be paying child support, pay your children's support on time every month. Remember that child support is for the well-being of your children and their future.
- **Tell your relatives and friends to pay their support.** If you have relatives and friends who should be paying child support, encourage them to do so. It is important that we all work to raise awareness about the importance of child support for our children's future. Don't tolerate jokes about people who "get away" without paying their support.
- **Let your legislators and county commissioners know you think child support is critical.** Legislators set child support guidelines, establish procedures and tools for the enforcement of support, and appropriate money for the child support system. County boards administer the day-to-day workings of the child support system and allocate county funds for the system. Both legislators and commissioners need to hear from you — their constituents — how important strong child support enforcement is to the well-being of children.

CDF and CCC express their great appreciation to interns Alva Waller and Judith Tennebaum who worked tirelessly to research and organize data and help draft this report.

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